

TO: The Committee on Natural Resources
U.S. House of Representatives

From; David F. Berry
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Subject; Bill no. H.R.59

My name is David F. Berry. I am a St. Thomas fisherman as well as a farmer. I have been fishing and farming in order to survive since I was only 12 years old. I have been very vocal in our fishing and farming industries for many years. I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to you on the matter of local government having control over the local waters.

I have been speaking out on the poor management of our natural resources and the exploitation of our local producers by the various government agencies for a long time. Our waters are being controlled by people who know very little about the Virgin Islands. Unfortunately, these people have made decisions that are not the best for our islands, the fisheries, the fisherman, or our people. Many years ago, I was a victim of some of these poor decisions. Me, and 4 other local St. Thomas fishermen, were jailed for catching fish in BVI waters. Though we had fished there for many years, a recent agreement made between the USVI and the BVI governments put us in a bad spot. The people that signed the agreement were stateside charter fishermen (Johnny Harms) and federal Fish and Wildlife officials. In this treaty, the charter boats were allowed in BVI waters, but the local fishermen were not. They were actually declared non-US citizens in the BVI court. They were labeled as “foreign fishing vessels”, and therefore not represented under the treaty. We lost our case, as well as the fishing equipment. Not one US government official (local or federal) even came to our rescue. Since then, I have made it my business to be more aware of the laws and policies that affect our islands.

We, the Virgin Islands people, have been victim to this mismanagement and poor representation by the federal government for many years. Some of these “federal officials” have been born and raised, never seeing the ocean, go to college, and come here and change our lives. We, the fishermen, have been treated as if we had a fleet of huge boats, and we catch tons of fish daily, with no regard to the environment. But in reality, we are a extremely small fishing “fleet”...no one is catching tons of fish or lobster, and the respect that these fisherman have for their environment is inspirational. I use to throw back my small lobsters or the ones with eggs long before there were any rules and regulations...and I learned to do that from the fisherman who taught me how to fish.

There are five government agencies created to “control” the fishermen. They are; The US Department of Commerce; National Marine Fisheries Council; NOAA; Caribbean Fish and Management Council; Fish and Wildlife; Many of them are run by non- Virgin Islanders, because of this, many of the rules and regulations have been put upon us. The government agencies have been able to fulfill their “closing” quotas by limiting our

fishing areas and not having to close off non-Virgin Island areas. Drug and gun dealers have less government agencies against them!

About 15 years ago, I went to a Caribbean Fisheries council meeting in Puerto Rico. I was there because the council was threatening to stop trap fishing in the US Virgin Islands. I was totally shocked when I found out that the first item for discussions was on whether to allow the continued harvest of juvenile fish for aquariums. Not only were they taking these fish before they had any chance of reproducing, they were using toxic chemicals to do it, and there is a 90% death rate....that means only 10% survived the trip to their aquarium homes, and they were killing our reefs. Here I was, fighting to keep trap fishing, in order to feed my island people..., with absolutely no by-catch....but these guys were taking it only for decoration! I could not understand the lack of common sense that this government organization was operating with. How come I, just a humble fisherman, realized that they will truly destroy our fisheries taking the juvenile fish and using toxic chemicals on our reefs! Needless to say, I watched these government officials allow the continued harvest of these juvenile fish....and then pass laws that made my job even more difficult than it was already, without closing one area in Puerto Rico.

Over the years, I have worked very hard at trying to get our government officials to help the fishermen. I have come to realize that these agencies are not interested in protecting our environment. They never say anything about the over development of our islands. Our fisheries have been the victim of poor management for many years, such as the huge fish kill in Enighed Pond, St. John; the coral bleaching of our fragile coral reefs, or the dying off of all the sea urchins years ago. None of these monumental tragic assaults to our fisheries was caused by the fishermen. Though, these governmental agencies that are destroying my livelihood, in order to protect the fisheries, have never even addressed these issues. Above all, studies have shown that these closures have not stopped the demise of our fisheries. Their blatant disregard of the real danger to our environment has highlighted the fact that these agencies don't really care, and they have very little knowledge of our environment. They are not addressing the real cause of this demise. They have never said a word against the charter industry, which catches fish for fun, or the aquarium fishery, that prevents any reproduction on any level. Just the local fishermen are being attacked on every level they can! Now the local government has even taken away our market.

We have very little natural resources here. The ocean is our largest one. Our "fleet" of fishermen is very small. There are not enough of us to "over-fish" our oceans. We need our fisheries, not only do they provide work for our fishermen, but they also supply our local population with organic quality protein. We need government organizations that have people who have an intimate knowledge of our environment and its people. The current agencies are filled with people who have no roots here. These people will be the first people that leave here if we have any kind of trouble...whether it is a hurricane, earthquake, or war...leaving us, without a way of feeding ourselves. The location of our islands demand that we have some sort of self sufficiency.....we have a huge ocean and a 12 month a year growing season, yet we cannot feed our selves? I am also a crop farmer; I use to grow thousands of pounds of organic fruits and vegetables, until the government put livestock on the crop farms.

It's about time we take control again. The poor management of our resources has put our environment in a fragile state. We cannot keep blaming the fishermen for the state of

our fisheries, as long as we continue to allow the over development of our islands. The continued onslaught of silt and chemicals on our fragile reefs will surely destroy our islands as we know it. These people with their PhDs know that the destruction of our coastal zones is what is destroying the fisheries, yet they don't even try to address the situation. The fishermen have not been the cause of our fisheries decline, but a victim of it. We need people who have a little common sense as well as an intimate knowledge of our environment. We need people who will put the integrity of our islands eco system above money. At this present moment, it is all about money, jobs, doctorate degrees, grants and working in paradise....these people don't care if they ever have fish and fungi again....most of them have never had it yet! So, I am not only asking you to take control, but put in people that will work for the good of all instead of just his ability to get more money. Right now, our fisheries people at the University of the Virgin Islands have been very active in trying to find fault with the fishermen. At the same time, they are farming tilapia fish...and selling them. If this is not a conflict of interest, than what is? Are they going to use there PhD's to put us out of business. Recently a professor from UVI wrote a letter to Caribbean Fisheries Management Council to close the yellow fin grouper bank. He succeeded. He probably got a government grant for doing it, another letter to his degree, and more sales for his tilapia fish. I have never seen this man at a meeting protesting against the development of our coastline or coastal run off. You have to ask yourself, does he really have what is for the best for our island on his mind?

It is not too late to get our fisheries back. We really have no choice. If we let our ocean die, it is only our own fault. You don't have to be marine biologists to see what is happening here. We need people who are willing to put the healing or our eco system above all else, and realizing that the local fishermen is part of that ecosystem.

Thank you for your time.
Sincerely,
David F. Berry